

Tanja Aho, "Neoliberalism, Racial Capitalism, and Liberal Democracy: Challenging an Emergent Critical Analytic," *Lateral* 6.1 (2017).

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Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities

Institutionality

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## Neoliberalism, Racial Capitalism, and Liberal Democracy: Challenging an Emergent Critical Analytic

Tanja Aho

**ABSTRACT** Response to Jodi Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis: Forms of Institutionality, In the Making," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Aho pointedly argues that studies of institutionality all too often substantiate what she calls neoliberalocentrism, which readily posits neoliberalism as the singular paradigm into narrating a teleological development of history. Instead, she echoes Kim and Schalk to articulate 'crip-of-color materialism' as an analytic that thickens understandings about global structures of inequity and fissures within them.

It is not just different structures of oppressive violence that radical scholars are trying to make legible, it is violence of a certain depth, with specific and morbid implications for some peoples' *future existence as such*.

– Dylan Rodríguez, "Racial/Colonial Genocide and the 'Neoliberal Academy'"<sup>1</sup>

The forum editors Chris Eng and Amy King open their introduction with Lisa Lowe's words that "it is necessary to . . . imagine a much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now."<sup>2</sup> Lisa Lowe's historiography of intimacy at the confluence of racial capitalism and liberal democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century offers just such a "much more complicated set of stories." But so do the contributions to this forum on "Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities," which offer much-needed reminders of the necessity of critical analytics that have remained all too lateral within our fields. The contributors also advance insights that are in conversation with or could be usefully engaged by another critical analytic that has currently taken a dominant hold in cultural studies: neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> In the following, I want to discuss the politics of this emerging methodology that centers neoliberalism as an explanatory paradigm and a field of adversity in studies of cultural political economy, and outline some of the pitfalls that a shift from racial capitalism to neoliberalism engenders.

The particular analytic of neoliberalism has found a much wider reach than traditional studies of political economy, spanning from affect theory to queer studies, from animal studies to ecocriticism.<sup>4</sup> Across these fields, neoliberalism-focused analyses are influenced by two major thinkers. Most cited by far is critical geographer David Harvey, whose classical Marxist analysis sees processes of neoliberalization as part and parcel of the globalized class struggle for resource redistribution.<sup>5</sup> Then there are the writings of Michel Foucault, whose thinking has been highly influential in the field of governmentality studies, especially in respect to biopolitics, which for Foucault can only be understood as a disciplinary regime in the context of liberalism and its variances.<sup>6</sup> In their wake, the humanities have witnessed an abundance of work on neoliberalism, from political

philosopher Wendy Brown's polemic about the end of democracy to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's cultural analysis of neoliberal able-nationalism.<sup>7</sup> What most of these recent studies share is what I call "neoliberalocentrism"—evoking J. K. Gibson-Graham's critique of capitalocentrism—an a priori belief that neoliberalism has succeeded in its teleological march to global hegemony and now shapes everything from our national policies to the ways in which we relate to, feel, and understand our very selves.<sup>8</sup> While there is certainly a geographical, cultural, and historical specificity to our contemporary moment, neoliberalism is oftentimes evoked, as Arlene Dávila points out, as a shorthand for a confluence of events, developments, and structural and cultural changes that are a lot "more contradictory and uneven."<sup>9</sup> Such shorthand, Dávila warns us, applied "without any specificity about whether we may be referring to a particular ideology, or a technique of government, or a policy, or a financialization regime," not only weakens the forcefulness of our analyses and arguments, but also dilutes the efficacy of our critical interventions.<sup>10</sup>

In this response then, I would like to nudge neoliberalocentrist analytics towards an engagement with crip of color materialism, which the forum contributors already advance in various ways. By crip of color materialism, I reference the convergence of a historical materialist critical disability studies/crip theory/mad studies with critical race theory and queer of color critique.<sup>11</sup> Such an approach situates regimes of normalization and pathologization within the *longue durée* of the co-constitution of patriarchal racial capitalism and liberal democracy. It approaches structures of exclusion, dispossession, and death, and their concomitant ideas of human worth, vis-à-vis delegitimizing assignments of intensity, instability, and irrationality. In so doing, it encourages scholars interested in questions of political economy to move from evoking David Harvey ad nauseam to instead follow those who advance indigenous, critical race, and postcolonial perspectives on political economy, such as Jodi Byrd, Cedric Robinson, and Malini Johar Schueller.<sup>12</sup> A crip of color materialist analytics returns to the question of rationality—one of the central tenets of liberal thought—to trouble its beginnings at the center of racial capitalism.

My larger argument is that neoliberalocentrist analytics face a number of problems: First, they often follow a dehistoricized hermeneutics that reinvests ontological forcefulness into well-critiqued binaries that extend racial capitalism's ideological dominance. In other words, anti-neoliberal critiques oftentimes reinforce dichotomies such as the public versus private and the political versus economic. Second, they choose to center the supposed novelty of certain phenomena over the *longue durée* of patriarchal, racial capitalism as it has become manifest most recently through liberal democratic systems. Third, neoliberalocentrist analytics tend to ascribe all current woes to neoliberalism because of an inability to think through the co-constitutive nature of various forms of governmentality (the police/carceral state, the rule of law/*raison d'état*, etc.)—despite Foucault's emphasis that these are not incompatible systems but instead co-occurring rationalities characterized by "tensions, frictions, mutual incompatibilities, successful or failed adjustments, unstable mixtures, and so on."<sup>13</sup> While engaging with Jodi Melamed's writing in particular, my response is meant to serve as an addendum to all of the essays offered in this forum as a way to highlight the crip of color materialist analytics I have found most productive in understanding the contemporary materializations of the co-constitution of liberal democracy and racial capitalism.

Jodi Melamed's work has offered many productive avenues through which to approach (higher) education, institutions, and questions of difference, diversity, and inclusion as they are situated and become manifest in racial, neo/liberal capitalism.<sup>14</sup> As Melamed argues in this forum, neoliberalocentrist analyses often either ascribe to the Harvey-ite lament of the weakening of liberal democracy's bulwark institutions, such as the

university and the union, or follow the putatively Foucauldian biopolitical concern for the extension of “economic measures to every dimension of human existence.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of a teleological heuristics of neoliberalocentrism, Melamed encourages scholars to investigate the amplification, the intensification, of already established “liberal modes of institutional power” under racial capitalism, to focus on the “internal and continuous” dynamics of “accumulation in political modernity.”<sup>16</sup> Such a shift away from neoliberalism to racial capitalism as the overarching framework allows for more nuanced understandings of not just the continuities, but also the changes between past centuries and today. As Melamed argues, one possible insight might be the waning importance of citizenship as a determinant for dispossession, although contemporary contestations around resource exploitation and land claims, deportations, the “refugee crisis” in Europe, and many others might complicate this insight and certainly encourages more thorough studies of this nexus.

Nevertheless, the most important intervention that Melamed offers in her piece is to reconceptualize neoliberalism as intensification, as the amplification of “racial capitalist colonial modernity’s shadow rationality” that is “the evil twin of its liberal political manifest reason.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the recent turn towards neoliberalocentrist analytics has one major, albeit unintended, bonus: it makes manifest the violent processes of liberal democracy in racial capitalism that can only function vis-à-vis exclusion, dispossession, and oppression because it has now become disturbing “even for centered white nationals.”<sup>18</sup> What from an indigenous, postcolonial, and/or crip/queer of color perspective already appears as a structural legitimation of unjust resource allocation—or, in the words of Audra Simpson, theft—now becomes tangibly unsettling also for the colonizer.<sup>19</sup> The anxious states that neoliberalism has been found guilty of producing in white, Western subjects—and that affect theory and more recent strands of mad/disability studies have taken up—are not to be discounted.<sup>20</sup> But, instead of halting at an analysis of their particular manifestation, our analyses can be enriched by considering how this discomfort speaks to larger epistemological lacunae.

Furthermore, I would extend Melamed’s insight by emphasizing the need to realize that what is claimed to have been newly marketized under neoliberalism, and how democracy has supposedly been de-politicized in order to be economized, reproduces dichotomies that have been foundational for racial capitalism’s dominance —such as the separation of the political and economic, the public and the private. Critical race studies and women of color feminisms have long contested epistemological approaches that recenter such dichotomies, and yet they remain prominent in anti-neoliberal analytics. As Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo outlines, it is the depoliticization resulting from a conceptual differentiation between the political and economic in liberal democracy under racial capitalism that has created the framework for neoliberalization processes.<sup>21</sup> It would thus be imperative for analyses concerned with the role of political economy to avoid reproducing such polarizations and instead challenge naturalized dichotomies that ahistorically lament the marketization of specific practices and goods. There is very little work as yet that attempts to tease out in what ways the “contraction of democracy to liberalism” (Woods) that is an inherent tendency of liberal democracy under racial capitalism has produced the historical specificities within which we find ourselves faced with neoliberalization processes.<sup>22</sup>

I have been suggesting that crip of color materialism proves especially productive as an analytic approach for nuancing this particular nexus. Recall the frequency with which scholars describe (neo)liberalism as a rationality. Given the centrality of rationality for liberalism, which allowed for its “twin birth” with racial chattel slavery (Lorsurdo), a mad/critical disability studies centered through critical race theory and historical

materialism would be equipped to unsettle the basic logic of liberal capitalism's ableism that is articulated to racialized and gendered realities.<sup>23</sup> As Nirmala Erevelles has argued, the pathologization of those deemed property/non-citizens is foundational for liberalism's production of freedom through exclusion, oppression, dispossession, and death.<sup>24</sup> This pathologization functions via delegitimation by levels of intensity, instability, and irrationality, and has historically served as the justification for settler colonialism, genocide, slavery, imperialism, and the oppression and exploitation of the majority of the population, including indigenous people, people of color, women, people with disabilities, people who are trans/intersex/queer, the poor, the undocumented, and the incarcerated. Returning to and situating contemporary issues within the *longue durée* of patriarchal, racial capitalism through a mad studies lens of intensity, instability, and irrationality would highlight the overlapping techniques of government that we too often reduce to the homogenized adversary "neoliberalism."

Finally, I would challenge us to think more thoroughly about the claim that neoliberalism "just requires a *techne*," that it lacks a moralism of its own—the only truly distinguishing feature that justifies the "neo-" for Melamed, since she rightfully rejects dehistoricized claims about neoliberalism's "undoing" of democracy (re: Wendy Brown).<sup>25</sup> Neoliberalism seems to be characterized by a heightened proceduralism, a "reified sense as mere administration," but I would argue that such an intensification of biofinancialization to a "reductive logic of calculability" certainly offers its own moralism.<sup>26</sup> How else could we describe the austerity shaming of Greece by the troika? What would the otherwise extensively analyzed biopolitical regimes of self-care be but a renewed moralism of civilizational advancement and respectability? Do universities not continue to inculcate their students with a moralism of economic success as the good life? If we truly want to argue for the importance of a neoliberal analytic, we need to parse out more carefully how many of the "technes" of today are continuations of earlier modes of governance, how certain liberal tenets maintain their stranglehold on our conceptualizations of the good life, and in what ways the changes that we want to describe as neoliberal can help us understand the systems that shape our current moment in order to "write or imagine alternative knowledges, to act on behalf of alternative projects of communities," as Lisa Lowe reminds us.<sup>27</sup> It is the continued moralism of the rule of law that sustains the naturalized liberal democratic structures that depoliticize economic exploitation and manifest in discourses of individual responsibility, freedom, and democracy. If we are to challenge the current political-economic order, however we conceptualize it, we need to begin by returning to the foundations of racial capitalism and liberal democracy. This return will allow us to move from a mere concern with the intensification of economic exploitation to a foundational critique of the ideological structures that are currently perpetuated in most neoliberalocentrist critiques. It could offer an analytic that would allow us not only to critique current structures of inequality, but open the door to overcoming liberal imaginaries on the left.

## Notes

1. Dylan Rodríguez, "Racial/Colonial Genocide and the 'Neoliberal Academy': In Excess of a Problematic," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2012): 812. [↗](#)
2. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 208. [↗](#)
3. The 2014 American Studies Association conference featured a panel called 'Kill that Keyword?' in which neoliberalism seemed to be the most despised and communally acceptable keyword to excise from our scholarly lexicon. While many seemed to note the ubiquitization and accompanying diffusion of meaning that the term

neoliberalism had recently undergone, less attention was paid to the reasons for this development. [↗](#)

4. While there are too many studies employing neoliberalism as a critical analytic to list here, for the fields cited in the text see, for example, Jordan T. Camp, "'We Know This Place': Neoliberal Racial Regimes and the Katrina Circumstance," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 693–717; Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Julietta Hua and Neel Ahuja, "Chimpanzee Sanctuary: 'Surplus' Life and the Politics of Transspecies Care," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2013): 619–37; Robert McRuer, "Crippling Queer Politics, or the Dangers of Neoliberalism," *Scholar & Feminist Online* 10, no. 1/2 (2011–12); Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). [↗](#)
5. By far the most cited is David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). A similar approach to neoliberalization processes in critical geography is advanced by Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Simon Springer, who is also a critical geographer but challenges some of the liberal tenets of Harvey's and Peck's school of thought, has most prominently nudged the study of neoliberalization processes into a conversation with anarchist theory. See Simon Springer, "Postneoliberalism?," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 47, no. 1 (2015): 5–17; Simon Springer, "Neoliberalism as Discourse: Between Foucauldian Political Economy and Marxian Poststructuralism," *Critical Discourse Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012): 133–47. I provide a much more nuanced discussion of these and other fields concerned with neoliberalism and neoliberalization processes in my dissertation, "A Mad Critique of Anti-Neoliberalism: Sanism in Contemporary Left Thinking and Scholarship on Political Economy." [↗](#)
6. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008). While the study of biopolitics and governmentality has become a burgeoning field, there are fewer studies that engage with Foucault's thinking on neoliberalism (although, as I argue in my dissertation, his insights on neoliberalism should be quite central to the study of biopolitics). Among the former are works such as Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); David T. Mitchell with Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008). Among the latter there have been a few recent publications. See Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter, eds., *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015). [↗](#)
7. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Mitchell with Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability*. [↗](#)
8. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996). [↗](#)

9. Arlene Dávila, "Locating Neoliberalism in Time, Space, and 'Culture,'" *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 552. [↗](#)
10. Ibid. [↗](#)
11. The term "crip of color" has been used by several critical disability studies scholars, most prominently in Jina B. Kim's work. See Jina B. Kim, "Anatomy of the City: Race, Infrastructure, and U.S. Fictions of Dependency" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016) and Jina B. Kim, "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's 'Enabling Whom?'" *Lateral* 6.1 (2017), <http://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-crip-of-color-critique-kim>. For examples of texts that might be considered to fall under "crip of color," see: Chris Bell, ed., *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011); David J. Connor, Beth A. Ferri, and Subini A. Annamma, eds., *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Jin Haritaworn, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Akemi Nishida, "Understanding Political Development Through an Intersectionality Framework: Life Stories of Disability Activists," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2016); Sami Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification With/in Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2013); Louise Tam, "Neurasthenia Revisited: Psychologizing Precarious Labor and Migrant Status in Contemporary Discourses of Asian American Nervousness," *Disability and the Global South* 1, no. 2 (2014): 340–64. [↗](#)
12. See Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Malini Johar Schueller, *Locating Race: Global Sites of Post-Colonial Citizenship* (Albany: State University of New York, 2009). [↗](#)
13. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 21. [↗](#)
14. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). [↗](#)
15. Jodi Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis: Forms of Institutionality, In the Making," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-institutionality-making-melamed/>. [↗](#)
16. Ibid. [↗](#)
17. Ibid. [↗](#)
18. Ibid. [↗](#)
19. Audra Simpson's comment during the roundtable discussion "The Misery of Settler Colonialism: Roundtable on Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* and Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus*" at the American Studies Association convention in 2015. [↗](#)
20. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Tanja Aho, Liat Ben-Moshe, and Leon Hilton, eds., "Mad Futures: Culture, Politics, Affect," Special Forum in *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (forthcoming 2017): 291-302; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Merri Lisa

Johnson, "Bad Romance: A Crip Feminist Critique of Queer Failure," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 251–67; Brenda A. LeFrancois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume, eds., *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2013); Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). [↗](#)

21. Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Liberal Democracy and Neoliberalism: A Critical Juxtaposition," *New Political Science* 30, no.2 (2008): 127–59. [↗](#)
22. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229. [↗](#)
23. Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 302. [↗](#)
24. Nirmala Erevelles, "(Im)Material Citizens: Cognitive Disability, Race, and the Politics of Citizenship," in *Foundations of Disability Studies*, ed. Matthew Wappett and Katrina Arndt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 145–76. [↗](#)
25. Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis." [↗](#)
26. Ibid. [↗](#)
27. Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 208. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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